DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 157 FL 015 986

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TITLE Models of Inservice Teacher Training.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 8p.; In: English Language Development. Proceedings of a Conference on Issues in English Language Development for Minority Language Education (Arlington, VA, July 24, 1985); see FL 015 974.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; Bilingual Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; English (Second Language); Federal Aid; *Information Dissemination; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Peer Counseling; *Research Utilization; State Programs
IDENTIFIERS New York

ABSTRACT

The federally-funded New York Bilingual Education Multifunctional Support Center provides support services for Title VII and other bilingual education programs, and actively promotes the analysis and application of research findings relating to bilingual instruction and teacher training. It promotes professional development activities that are personal, informal, collegial, reflective, analytical, accommodating of teacher needs and styles, and interactive. In addition to individual technical assistance services, four types of activities are offered: a research-based seminar on current issues and findings in teacher training; an instruction and management fair for sharing and displaying programs, materials, techniques, and strategies used with limited-English-proficient (LEP) students; a language development specialist academy bringing together teacher representatives considered by their peers to be effective at promoting language development; and roundtables on issues related to instruction of LEP high school students and to the role of language in learning. The center is currently focusing on the adaptation of research findings to instructional practice in various classroom situations and on more systematic use of workshop participants as future workshop leaders. (MSE)

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FL 015 986

Models of Inservice Teacher Training

Carmen I. Mercado

The title of this paper is unintentionally misleading. What is described in the narrative which follows is not inservice models, but rather one emerging research-based approach for addressing the concerns of Title VII personnel. To be more precise, the approach is one that gives form, meaning, and direction to the training and technical assistance activities of the New York Bilingual Education Multifunctional Support Center (BEMSC). For this reason, basic information about the project and the context in which it functions are also discussed.

As some may already know, the BEMSCs are federally funded centers contracted "to design and implement support services in bilingual education so as to provide educational personnel and community participants with a cohesive and well-organized system of supportive services for improving the quality and content of ongoing Title VII and other bilingual education programs" (U.S. Department of Education 1983). Support services that may be categorized as inservice training or staff development efforts include formal activities, which are intended to direct the growth of knowledge and skills, and technical assistance to individual districts for the design and implementation of local activities.

Since the staff of the center is committed to the application of sound theory and research findings to instruction and training—particularly now that a great deal of information has been generated by the Part C Research Agenda studies—we actively seek to promote the analysis and utilization of this information by serving in the following capacities:

- As information brokers, disseminating information about current research and theory pertinent to instruction for limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, demystifying it, and making it useful;
- As providers of support to individual school districts, demonstrating ways in which research and theory may be incorporated into the planning of district-based inservice activities;
- As capacity builders, working with teachers and teacher trainers to develop appropriate applications of research and theory and preparing these professionals to serve as resource personnel within their districts.

In effect, our purpose is to promote decision making based upon the best information we have available and to extend the range of resources districts may rely on to improve instructional services for LEP students.

However, in providing our services, we have had to deal with three basic realities which affect how we approach training. First, the New York BEMSC operates "from the outside looking in" both because it is separate from the school systems that it serves and because its services are considered supplementary to those provided at the school and district level. Thus, how we promote participation in our activities and how we provide follow-up assistance are two areas that have posed a special challenge to our creativity. It should be pointed out, however, that these problems are not unique to the BEMSCs; they are problems of inservice training for schools and districts as well as for institutions of higher education.

Second, our school- and district-based colleagues often confront multiple demands and responsibilities, which make their time a limited and precious commodity. While we may seek to enter into partnerships with them to design activities that address their concerns, asking these individuals to meet with us to plan or to be available to share their experiences with others is not as simple as it sounds—no matter how committed both parties may be to collaboration.

Lastly, we are fully aware that research and theory have tended to have little influence on practice. We believe that school and district personnel may have confused or negative perceptions and attitudes toward research, not because they are incapable of appreciating its value or understanding its implications, but because the presentation of research and theory requires specific sensitivities and skills that go beyond what researchers and theoreticians should be expected to do. As a result, we have assumed the responsibility of serving as mediators of research—demonstrating how research and theory suggest ways to improve instruction or to determine the content and process of training in an objective and systematic manner. Needless to say, providing our services while also developing these applications has not been easy to orchestrate.

We are attempting to deal with these realities and to promote professional development through an approach that is personal/informal, collegial, reflective/analytical, accommodating, and interactive. However, I am compelled to state that while this approach represents empirically validated principles and procedures, some of what is described here was initially developed on the basis of intuition, experience, and innate sensitivity to what was appropriate and what was not. I became involved in training, as many of us have, with little preparation for the job and often found it overwhelming to learn about my new role while also keeping up with the professional literature—however scant it may have been in the late 1970s. I call attention to this to make the point that it is possible to develop sound instructional and training practices in the absence of

research. Indeed, research serves to validate and explain what we do as much as it influences what we do.

As was previously stated, the New York BEMSC endeavors to set the course for the professional development of its clientele by means of an approach which is personal/informal, collegial, reflective/analytical, accommodating, and interactive.

Personal/Informal

We do not endeavor to change the behavior of our colleagues in the field, but rather to establish channels of communication, cultivating relationships based on trust and mutual support. This is essential to the provision of useful, timely services and is a means of gaining access to local resources and support personnel.

The past year, in particular, has been especially fruitful in the number of close working relationships we have been able to establish. Our success has been due in large part to the following factors.

Providing timely help. We have been supportive of locally initiated efforts, either by being physically present to help out if our schedules permitted, or otherwise by telephone. In short, we have gotten to know our colleagues as individuals and have gained their confidence by being there when we were needed. Moreover, we have gained valuable insights about the concerns of program staff that no formal meeting or questionnaire could have brought to light.

Observing and learning from others. In order to understand the realities of day-to-day operations in a given school or district, we have visited classrooms frequently, observing and learning from others as they follow their usual routines, confronting problems, and making decisions. (I cannot help but wonder how much I would have missed if I had not supressed the tendency to make judgments and had not left myself open to the experience of classroom life as it is, rather than as one thinks it should be. As a result, I have walked away from certain experiences convinced that sometimes practice does defy theory!) Indeed, demonstrating to others that we want to understand their situations, that we want to learn from them, has prompted these professionals to seek out our assistance and advice on those things about which they feel sensitive or uncertain. Difficult as it may be to believe, school and district personnel often do not have the opportunity to discuss their experiences with "nonjudgmental others." For us, this has provided an invaluable opportunity to learn about the diversity of contexts in which instruction for LEP students occurs. We have used this information to "fine tune" our activities, focusing them more sharply on the realities our colleagues experience.

Using what we know to make others look good. We use every available opportunity to call attention to those procedures and techniques we

observe, that are thought to be important, but which our colleagues may not have had the time to realize. We know from firsthand experience that having one's practice validated by research dispels doubts, develops self-assurance, and leads to more systematic behaviors. Moreover, highlighting the importance of research in explaining practice suggests to others that they are doing something right. Unfortunately, teachers, in particular, often express fears of research because the message that is subtly conveyed when it is presented to them is that they are doing something wrong and that their behaviors need to be changed.

Collegiality

We are committed to supporting and providing a forum for our colleagues in the schools and districts to share experiences and techniques that they have found to be successful or have generated from research to deal with particular areas of concern or interest. We have also been collaborators and mentors, working as professional equals with interested colleagues, making presentations, sharing and exploring, reflecting together. This collegial approach is beneficial to all in that it lessens the feelings of isolation that most have experienced. It also contributes to the participants' professional development in a way that no formal activity or workshop could possibly match.

Reflection and Analysis

Reflection and analysis is a means of guiding others to analyze, understand, and clarify misconceptions and deal with behaviors and situations that arise in the course of a typical day. Since the routines and pace of the school day do not usually allow for reflective time and since traditional inservice programs have tended to be prescriptive, we believe that this type of introspection is essential if one is to understand situational factors that affect instruction. This introspection also provides the impetus for self-initiated, self-directed, and self-evaluated learning, without which professional development is not possible. In effect, guided reflection places the teacher or teacher trainer in the role of the researcher, rather than being the object of someone else's inquiry.

Accommodation

In order to meet the needs of individuals at different stages of professional development who have different learning styles, the training activities of the center have been designed to accommodate diversity. Thus, our major instructional activities vary in terms of the following:

- The characteristics of the participants (Who will be involved?)
- The incentives for participation (Why are they involved?)

- Sponsorship and decision making (Who initiates and plans the activity, and why?)
- Location and scheduling (When and where?)
- Duration (For how long?)
- The goals and focus of the activity (What is the purpose?)
- The form of the activity (What format will be used?)
- The training approach and techniques (What is appropriate?).

Specifically, four major types of activities are offered in addition to individual technical assistance. The Trainers' Seminar is a series of monthly, full-day sessions (six to seven in total) intended to present information on the content and process of training—information that is empirically derived as well as based on what our colleagues in the field consider to be effective. A combination of lectures and discussions is used to present the information, and small-group analysis is used to explore the information's utility and application. During these sessions, participants are also given time to share, discuss, and reflect on problems and concerns they have identified as being important. It should be emphasized that participants are especially eager to find out the extent to which their problems are shared by others and to learn how others are coping with these. In effect, while the planning of these sessions is based on information that has been gathered during our planning period (also referred to as needs sensing or needs assessment), the focus of each session is additionally sharpened to reflect the specific concerns of those attending each session.

The Instruction and Management Fair is a one-day event held during nonschool hours for purposes of sharing and displaying programs, materials, techniques, and strategies that are used by school and district personnel to provide instruction for LEP students. What is perhaps most significant about this event, beyond the incredible networking that it promotes, is that it involves working closely with our colleagues to accomplish a specific purpose. Representatives from the center meet regularly with representatives from schools and districts who, through a group decision-making process, advise us on the form and content of the activity. Recommendations are also made as to who should lead the various sessions. This past year, four such fairs were held; one in each of the major regions in New York State—New York City, Long Island, western New York, and the mid- and upper Hudson Valley area. Each fair was as unique and different as each of these areas.

The Language Development Specialist Academy (LDSA) brings together teacher representatives from throughout the state who have been nominated for participation by school and district personnel because

they are considered to be effective at promoting language development. The 20 or so individuals who are accepted for participation meet for ten full sessions; five Saturdays a month during the school year and one week during the summer. All travel costs are reimbursed and stipends are provided. Through the activities of the LDSA, participants engage in dialogues with researchers, learning about and commenting on the researchers' findings. The teacher representatives use this information to gain a greater understanding of their instructional practices, but also to seek appropriate application of the research to practice. Materials that are developed through these sessions are being shared locally and eventually will be made available for wider dissemination.

The center also conducts two issue-oriented roundtables, one focusing on issues related to instruction for LEP high school students and the other on issues related to the role of language in learning. Both are full- or half-day events for nonclassroom personnel—e.g. program coordinators, teacher trainers, principals, and superintendents.

Interactive

Our approach is interactive in that while we believe in the power of research to explain, influence, and validate practice, we also recognize that practice can inform and validate research. It is important that we keep an open mind and be receptive to all possibilities as we acquire greater understanding of the incredibly diverse and complex situations in which instruction for LEP students occurs. For this reason, what we have chosen to highlight about our approach is not the content, but the process we follow. It is evident from what has been indicated in the preceding narrative that we derive the content of training from two primary sources: (1) effective techniques and approaches identified by our district-based colleagues and (2) the empirical and theoretical literature in areas related to instruction, inservice education, and adult learning. The results of the first series of Part C Research Agenda studies dealing with effective instructional practices, as well as more recent findings of effective inservice education, have been especially useful in addressing questions and concerns which Title VII program staff have made known to us.

Many details of our approach have been omitted for the sake of brevity. What has been described are those aspects that are basic to the way we provide services. Needless to say, we have gained many insights as we have worked with others to accomplish the goals of the BEMSC. The following four are particularly significant:

- Our inservice activities have had reciprocal benefits since they have contributed as much to our professional development as we have been told they have contributed to the professional development of our clientele.

- Informal activities in which assistance and support are provided through consultation, problem analysis, and collaborative planning are as important for addressing professional concerns as are the more formal activities of the center, or even more so. In particular, we have been able to provide onsite assistance and follow-up to formal activities through our technical assistance efforts.
- Given the diversity of instructional settings in which instruction for LEP students occurs, it is essential that we periodically ground ourselves in the realities of those settings for which activities are to be designed.
- Working on activities that are not typically associated with inservice training, such as making presentations, designing staff development programs, or developing research applications, is a powerful means of promoting professional development while also meeting some of the real needs of the districts and of the center.

It would leave an incorrect impression to close this discussion without acknowledging that several aspects of the training approach used by the New York BEMSC will be reworked and refined in the coming year. Specifically, we are concerned with developing what Hunter refers to as *conditional knowledge*. "Conditional knowledge is the essence of translating science into artistry in teaching" (Hunter 1985, 58). In essence, it is knowing how to adapt or modify research findings to instructional practice in various classrooms.

We are also planning to make more systematic use of individuals who have participated in intensive activities—i.e., Language Development Specialist Academies and the Trainers Seminars—as workshop leaders and presenters for future activities, such as the Instruction and Management Fairs. Moreover, we recognize the need to develop procedures and techniques that districts can follow to take advantage of the heightened skills of their educational personnel who have received training from the center.

As one can see, there is much that needs to be done.

References

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